DISPARATE MINDS

BEAUTIFUL GHOSTS

Beautiful Ghosts

A *Disparate Minds* Short Story
By Plum Pudding

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"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second next best time is now."
—Unknown

"All of us invent ourselves. Some of us just have more imagination than others."
—Cher

"Beautiful Ghosts"
Being an Account of Wick's World, Things in the Woods, Government Papers, Happy Hour, Vampire Chic, Clothes from Hell, and Recollections

Wick wasn't Wick at the time; they remembered that most of all. Thinking back upon the events, the events that apparently had started so long ago, they were thoroughly aware of that fact — not that they were really, actually any different. But *the world* had been, the night that they first saw the ghost.

It began ten years ago, upon a midnight evening, in the wrong house, with the wrong perceptions. Wick was _____ at the time, and their father had ideas about them, ideas preordained since birth.

_____ really had no idea about any other option, and wasn't actually having a bad time. Later in life, he would hear about people who knew from the very first second they breathed that, oh yes, they were queer, absolutely, it was baked into them. And that was fine for those people, absolutely, and _____ didn't care to diminish that, but personally _____ thought they were a completely normal cisgendered heterosexual person for most of their life.

That midnight evening, they were in their bed, wrapped up in all of their blankets in a big fluffy cocoon. They liked the stimulus of that, having new soft stuff around all their skin. They slept naked, usually — if you got all wrapped up and covered and it was super dark, you didn't have to look at yourself and you could just feel the blankets. _____ couldn't, of course, describe why that was a good thing on paper — or, perhaps, hadn't even considered that they were doing it.

But yes, there they were, once upon a midnight dreary, and as they tried to fall asleep, there was a big-ass thunderstorm. You could hear the rain on the roof, every bit of it splishing and splattering, and you could, of course, easily hear what sounded like gunshots to the untrained ear, but was actually the deep noise of the storm.

_____ thought that the sound was a dangerous sound, so they lay in bed, and they tried to hear anything else but the hiss of the rain and the whip bang of the thunder.

It took a while before _____ noticed there was anything unusual at all to do with the yard. Their yard was stiff, and small, and mainly adorned by a single twisted and brambly cherry tree, but there was some sort of light shining through the window, and it was so subtle that you wouldn't notice it if you hadn't lived in the house for many years. It was such a precise angle. Only just… only just barely *shining* just above _____'s forehead and into the room.

So, of course, the thing to do was to investigate the yard. Draped in their blankets like a toga, _____ got up, as silently as they could manage. They walked past the bureau filled to the brim with the clothes from hell, and examined the light coming from just out the window.

There was an almost holy figure in the brambly garden. Something filled with light and peace. It was possibly a man. With the glowing brilliance of the body, it was hard to distinguish any real total features without straining one's eyes… but there was something *dynamic* about them, standing in those brambles. They had a strange androgyny — and not the skinny, overtly sexualised image of that idea, but a remarkably plain not-knowing embedded into them. The figure's skin and clothes were the exact same tone of bleached off-white which glowed iridescently in the deep witching hour; it was difficult to see where its form ended and began, especially in its transparent and luminous shape. The figure stood. Its arms did not move from its side. Its legs did not move from the spot. Occasionally, its head would tilt, or bob, as if looking for something to do. There was a melancholy in the air, as they watched the figure in the rain, its light illuminating the raindrops as they fell in their slick patternless pattern. Like the rain always did.

Examining them now, _____ discovered that the figure was floating about an inch from the ground. Not by much, but you could see the feet standing in midair, just slightly high enough above the ground that it did indeed look normal. It was such a slight difference, but it was there. They were just barely standing in the air. Those legs. They could almost pass as ordinary, but not quite.

And _____ felt like those feet were… untethered. At home. There was an understanding in there.

That wasn't the precise moment that *the thought* first came into their head, not by any means. It had come before, and it had been met with an unwillingness within them, a refusal to accept it. But it was the strongest sense of the feeling yet, what they perceived, looking at this figure's straight and chiselled, yet curved and lovely hips —

Oh fuck, I'm gay.

There was terror in the thought. Something frightening to the figure. They were beautiful, like the delicate 'plink' of piano notes; and like a slow tune, a waltz, they faded into the night.

* * *

You know what isn't a beautiful strange apparition appearing in your garden at midnight? Paperwork.

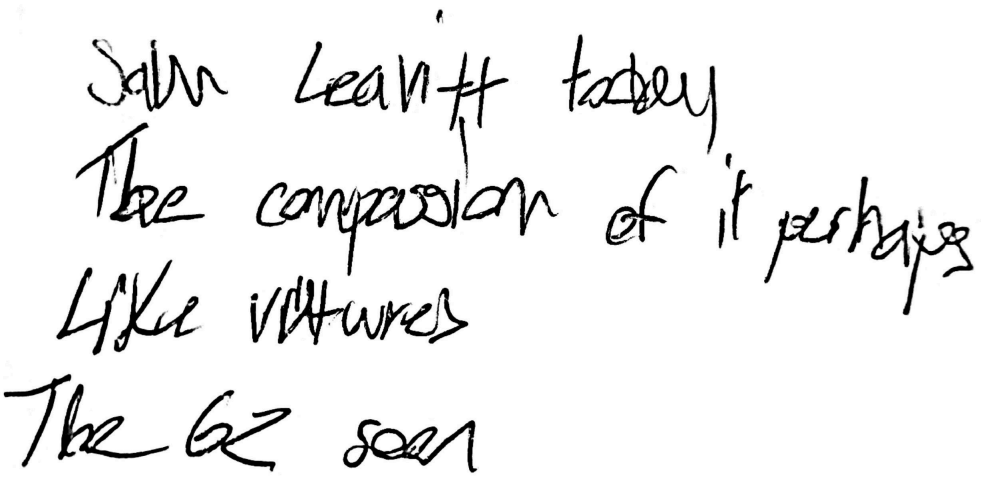
It's today, and Wick is sitting in the little room behind *Insolence,* going through a filing cabinet. They apparently have to go through filing cabinets now, which is strange, because Wick can't think of any time before literally now that they ever had to fill out paperwork. The job that he does for Anthea is a lot more laid back than that. It's usually science — logistical things. Sometimes medical, because he took a shitty first aid course once. But they just aren't used to, well, this feeling of, like… 'it's work'. Avenue doesn't really run off of money or anything, it's too ungoverned. You just do whatever you can to help. And that 'whatever' doesn't *usually* take the form of bureaucracy.

But here they are, sitting in a pile of sudden papers, and examining documentation that they could have sworn wasn't here before. June *swears* it was here before, but she's *new*. It really, really, *definitely,* wasn't.

After a while of looking through the notations, Wick discovers something strange. Official FBI documents. Loads of them, rummaged and mixed about into the pile of paperwork that's mainly shit that Anthea has been scrawling on scrap paper in pencil.

There's so much fancy detail in the documents, Wick isn't sure where to begin. There aren't *too many* pages of this stuff; like Wick had noted before, the Idiots are more twisted friends than an organisation and in no way governmentally liable, but there are enough of the pages for each page to seem a monumental task.

Excepting of course for Anthea's notes, which are usually shit like:



Ugh! Wick has never hated Anthea, but going through these notes is getting them damn close. The other documents aren't helpful either — all redacted, and with such precise articulate language. How is one meant to sort these?

The roar of the tavern outside the little hovel of a workplace is doubly distracting. Fascinating; one could probably examine the way that alcohol had been so thoroughly commodified and normalised as a part of American culture and how this is intensified during duress. But then again, Wick can't pretend that they aren't guilty of it themself. Plus, who would read a report

like that? Judging by the abandoned state of this filing cabinet, and the general disinterest in reports, only him.

Besides, that's a distraction — they really should be focusing on the notes.

Eventually, they become a little more neat and precise, if curly. Is this Serena's handwriting? The idea fascinates Wick; they can't imagine Serena's writing being curly and neat, yet it could really only be her. But they put it to the side; they're being far too cerebral for this grunt work, they just need to be organising things into three piles or so. They continue with the process. FBI sheets in one pile, Anthea's notes in one, and Serena(?)'s in another. But then, there is a fourth kind of sheet. The writing is *definitely* too neat. Like a font. Every letter is perfect. There are individual polaroid pictures attached, pasted next to each name. The document goes on for pages. Almost like a twisted school yearbook.

H 2 - PRESUMPTUOUS - COLUMN- 9

Compiled by Chester Lockley under the request of Anthea [redacted]

Subjects are to be referred to by corresponding Haunt arrival point, per instructions. No unnecessary detail prescribed; see individual files.

Wick looks through the pages, grabbing one at random.

- **Alistair — Elden Haunt Point.**
- **Janet — Verdant Haunt Point.**
- **Frederick — McDon Haunt Point.**
- **Jason — Gazpacho Haunt Point.**
- **Gabriel — CVS Haunt Point.**
- **Mike — Taj Haunt Point. X**
- **Asher — Oatley's Haunt Point**
- **Bertram — Avenue Birth. X**

- **Todd — Sharine Haunt Point, Gamma Seven.**

Wick assumes that the Todd in these notes is the Todd he knows. They do not know what "Gamma Seven" means. A chill falls over his spine as he continues to read.

- **Murdoch — Gazpacho Haunt Point.**
- **Daisy — Laundromat Haunt Point.**
- **Pete — Avenue Birth.**
- **Susie — Oatley's Haunt Point.**
- **Alfie — McDon Haunt Point.**
- **Julien — Madam Haunt Point.**
- **Kat — CVS Haunt Point.**
- **Ingrid — Verdant Haunt Point.**
- **Wrinkler — Taj Haunt Point. X**
- **Cole — CVS Haunt Point.**
- **Tatiana — Avenue Birth.**
- **David — Gazpacho Haunt Point.**
- **Landry — Verdant Haunt Point. X**
- **Wick — Elden Haunt Point, Delta Nine.**

Dear God. They know all the names. *Every single one* is a person in town, from newcomers like June to people who are long gone. All appropriately marked. So many names. It's — it's like a census. Or… or profiling. And their name is on it.

Who is Chester Lockley?

This is a small town. Wick knows people. Wick *knows* who works with Anthea. And before today it was them, Serena, sometimes Terrance, and as of three days ago, June.

And this Chester's face… it's familiar… Wick can't put their finger on it though. And it's probably irrelevant. Almost definitely irrelevant.

Wick doesn't usually instigate things, doesn't like to put their nose where it doesn't belong. Usually they get wrapped into something by Serena anyway, so why bother? But there's something dreadful about those specific papers, and, well, Anthea has some talking to do. And it had better not be ambiguous.

* * *

"I don't know a Chester," Anthea answers, surprising Wick to their very core. They had sort of assumed that Anthea would say something about the making of sawdust and how to tie knots with electrical wire rather than being, to be plain, forthcoming. Anthea is simply not that kind of lady.

"I simply can't explain what that sort of thing might be doing in my cabinet. Up to date too. Could it be a living document?"

Wick has checked with the one alive Avenue lawyer about such a thing, who had cut off a little bit of the paper to be sure. It isn't.

"It is such a strange concept, the organisation of things. *Feng Shui,*" she muses. "It is an articulate thing, like a spider, or the joints inbuilt within us."

Wick could definitely talk about organisation, and articulation — they're a big fan of both — but they don't have hours. "I'm sorry, I'm not really sure what you're asking of me precisely, Anthea, and I get really nervous when I don't understand someone — and I don't understand you, I don't understand you a lot because you have that whole mildly creepy wisdom thing going."

Anthea nods sagely. She then pries at her face with a solitary finger.

"There is work for you here. An answer to be found. Perhaps related to the Cosmic War. Always shrapnel." She adjusts her earrings. "It is true that I do not recall this yet."

Okay, not helpful??

Wick turns around and leaves the room, their mind racing. And it keeps leading specifically, even though they put great efforts to focus elsewhere, to *Lord of the Rings*.

But ignore that. They have a lot of mysteries to solve. Who's Chester Lockley? What's the deal with Anthea's cabinet? What did the paper mean? Who can they talk to about this? And also, what's Galadriel's Sword called again?

* * *

Days pass, in the way that they do in fairy tale and legend. This is no fairy tale, of course, the Fae are much too full of themselves to deign to investigate Avenue — but even so, the days pass in that kind of dreamlike murk, where nothing truly eventful seems to have occurred but for the passing of time in and of itself.

Of course, Wick *has* tried to do things. The cabinet holds no more hidden truths, and people around the town had little to say when questioned regarding the event, being busy in their own ephemeral lives.

Daisy sort of rolled her eyes at the question — she knows better, by now, than to become embroiled in anything Anthea might be interested in. Cole was far more interested in a baseball card he had found in a scrap bin, and as for Tom, he just smiled in that way that he did, mentioned that he was called Tom, and walked away.

The best people of Avenue rarely hold much of an interest in Wick, and the worst find his very being an affront to their senses. So, progress has been nonexistent, and while Wick desperately wants to know who this fellow was, they are *not* prepared to change themself in order to figure it out. No, if those people can't accept another human being long enough to help, then their help isn't worth it.

The whole thing is confusing.

"It doesn't sound really confusing," June says, taking a sip from her drink at the bar and then spitting it out. She *asked* for water. The bar is moody

tonight, especially busy. There is something in the air. But Wick doesn't care about that.

"But it is," Wick sighs, waving the papers in her face. "This is a *really* ominous bit of paperwork." June doesn't get it; paperwork is already, like, a lot more ominous than most things on a relative ominous scale. Creepy paperwork is a major no-no. But Wick can't possibly explain that out-loud, with the bemused way June is staring at him.

"I nearly went insane last week." June says, irritably, taking another sip of the not-water drink that she was still pissed about. "Like, actually, I'm not exaggerating. *I nearly went insane.* And you're talking about paperwork."

Scary paperwork! Wick nearly says, but they don't. Because this is embarrassing. And Wick is hard to embarrass. They switch tactics.

"I'm — I'm sorry about that, how are you doing?" Wick asks.

June says something, and Wick really isn't paying attention. They know that because they had asked, it is a horribly rude thing to not pay attention, but they can't help but feel something distant in the bar tonight, like there are new people about, or something, a buzz to the air that is entirely unusual. And upon noticing this, Wick becomes quite nervous, because they realise that June is *still talking,* and isn't just answering the question with 'good', or 'y'know', or some other tacky response, but with an actually detailed essay. They try tuning back in.

"—this place doesn't have grocery stores, do you ever think about that? No grocery stores? You'd like, *think* the grocery store would be the last bastion of civilization, what with it still going during COVID, and even that mass-hysteria thing, you know, when everyone thought they were right — and sure, there are plenty of McDonalds and CVSes in this fricking liminal-ass place, but *no, there's nowhere I can go to and buy a head of cabbage.* You ever think about that? I think that's crazy. I think that minus the whole creepy atmosphere, that's probably the biggest con to this hell town so far, but what do I know!? I'm just the new girl, and everyone calls me NEW GIRL for some reason—"

"Suffer," Serena says, interjecting herself into the conversation completely unprompted. Wick does not see her sneak up on them, and shrieks nervously.

June takes a deep breath, and places her head in her palms. "Sorry. I was spiralling. I'm useless."

"No biggie," Serena nods, casually, with the air of someone who had been friends with June for decades. Wick tries not to make their displeasure visible. June is great, but they'd known her for a *week*. Serena has latched on far too fast.

The music is good tonight, Wick notes, although he can't make out any words to it. Just some sort of dreamy synth. Wick supposes they could take the night off. Things can't keep going wrong forever.

* * *

A girl is flirting with Wick, which is nice. The pins on their jacket are helpful that way, all are labels in one way or another. Granted, they aren't quite as fun when you're going down a dark alleyway, but looking into this random girl's actually quite interested eyes is a definite perk. They're dancing, and Wick really never dances very often, so he sort of wobbles about and the girl laughs, so everything is good. There is a point to the world.

"What's your, like, deal, exactly?" the girl says, her voice all squeaky and delightful.

Wick is hesitant to answer. How does one answer that question? "What do you mean?" They laugh.

"Well…" she says, flirtatiously, looking up and down at them, "what's your gender?"

Wick smiles brightly. "So, I sort of put a lot of effort into people not knowing by first appearance, but like, I'd be happy to tell you. I know for a while that I started feeling like I was nothing, and I eventually considered myself bigender, but I felt like that was rapidly changing, really, and I went down a sort of genderflux genderfluid rabbithole sort of deal but that really wasn't entirely it either because there was a bit of that but there was more of a

third thing although I hate that term really, who's to say my third thing isn't someone else's sixty-first? I know some would consider me to fall sort of underneath the trans umbrella, and I do sort of like that but sometimes it feels like I am appropriating something. I still feel very connected to the gay male community but I've really started to hate feeling masculine lately, and that hasn't gone over well — maybe not really hate, actually, I suppose, more of a —"

"I'm sorry, I don't think this is going to work out," she says, leaving. *Fuck. Why does one try?*

Wick likes identities, likes boxes, likes feeling included — and they try to fit in all of the ones that they can manage that aren't lying to themself. It's a really cool thing. But people in Avenue don't *like* really cool things. They hadn't been able to find any good DVDs or comics anywhere. *Wait, was that girl expecting a one word answer?* They could go back and —

"Hey," a fuckboy says, approaching Wick. He curls a beckoning finger thing. Classy.

Wick likes fun, but now they really aren't in the mood. That girl had reminded Wick of a lot more people like her, of every gender, of every specific interest. Nobody here treats Wick like a human being, they treat them like a *list of things to be careful around,* a delicate flower, a cringe perpetually online idiot. Someone who would be better if they were like them.

Is that better than being constantly objectified or used as a tool? Wick doesn't know. Wick is fucking tired and just wants to go to bed now.

At least blankets are always there — if Wick goes and wraps themself up, they can start to feel a bit more at home.

* * *

Wick does not dream often, and as a scientist, he is often predisposed to disregard dreams, anyway. A lot of his dreams are materialistic ones, where he has found a new book at a store, an actual store, not one of Avenue's half-attempts of one. A bright, friendly, manicured place. He dreams of

shelves often, and placing things in his cart, which never quite makes it to the register, because there are always more things.

Wick never really thinks about this sort of thing too much when they are conscious, because they are not the kind of person to remember their dreams. But this morning, they remember the one they had last night.

They were sitting on a dock at the edge of the sea; not a wooden rickety dock, but a big granite thing that still somehow floated. There was something normal about the dock. Something utterly unremarkable. It was night, and fog had rolled in across the water, and it just *ate* the light around them, until there wasn't even light from the moon, and you couldn't see the ripples in the water at all. But Wick, sitting by the edge of the dock, legs dangling into the sea, could feel the wet trickly damp slosh about, silent but not still. Eventually, Wick could see a large, boxy shadow, floating above the water, and strands of dripping condensation falling down across it and back into the greater sea. It was vast, and thudded like eternity.

In the distance, it continued to hiss and undulate. It was clearly metal, but Wick didn't know how they knew such a thing, for it was far enough into the fog to be essentially formless. It smelled like if skunks had developed gasoline before humans. The box hung above the water. It was either the size of cities or the size of a door begging to be pulled open. It steadily approached.

* * *

Wick wakes with a shudder. There had been something primal about that dream. Anthea would call it a bad omen. Wick plods their fingers up and down their arm, trying to feel comfortable again. *Insolence* is silent downstairs, a sign that it is truly deep into the night. Really deep. Three or four a.m., most likely.

Wick can still smell the alcohol on their own breath. Their head hurts. Wick really *really* wants some goddamn milk.

They stumble through the process of putting their clothes on in the dark, and begin the slow path downstairs to the bar, being careful not to wake June or Serena, whose rooms are quite close by. Milk is necessary tonight, for some reason; deeply, deeply important.

The world is ringing like a dinner gong. Halfway down the stairs, Wick closes their eyes and just takes a second before trudging onwards. What *inspired them* to perform this late night lunacy? Wick knows that the answer *is* milk, of course it's milk, but also knows that they are being very stupid tonight.

The bar is silent. Terrance isn't at the counter. Todd isn't even by the stool with his sudoku. Not only is the bar silent, but it's empty too, and Wick realises that they have never seen such a thing as the place so completely vacant. People in Avenue are strange; they lurk by the bar even until breakfast. Terrance has to sweep out customers with a broom; they grow like mould, becoming part of the splintery wood of the place.

In the crummy fridge in the backroom, thank the lord, there is still some goddamn milk remaining. The world is a lovely place that has no problems, for there is milk. Wick begins to fill their morning mug with the milk, as it is the first thing to hand. Oh, god yes. This is a good thing. This is good milk. Yes.

"I've never seen you here before," says a cold sounding voice, and Wick jumps and yelps and FUCK what the FUCK who is that?? shit what what how do people KEEP SNEAKING UP

From the shock, Wick has even spilled a little of the sacred milk. Damn. Now they have less of it, and will have to mop it up too.

The owner of the voice is an immaculate man; glossy and a little effeminate, in a flowing white suit and bleach blonde hair in a sort of Elvis-y shape. There are little jade and turquoise-y highlights, from the suit's cufflinks to the man's heavy eyeshadow and thick makeup. There is a performative sense to him, he has the look of a superstar pop singer or a just-too-perfect goddamn *Twilight* vampire. And there he is, lurking in the corner, sucking upon a lollipop.

"It's rare I see another denizen of happy hour," the man says, smoothly, and as the dreamlike stupor of Wick's hangover begins to fade — thank heavens for adrenaline —, Wick begins to recognize the face. It's a face from the census, the creepy yearbook, the thing he'd been looking at all week. It is *the* face.

This is Chester Lockley.

* * *

Wick has many questions.

"Who are you? What do you have to do with Anthea? What's with the census? Why are you keeping track of us? How are you keeping track of us? Why do you have a last name? Aren't those, like, *gone* in Avenue? Why are you in a bar at 3 or 4 a.m.? Does Terrance know you're here? Is this allowed? What's with the lollipop —"

Chester raises a hand in the air calmly to get Wick to stop. "It's a new last name," Chester says. "I chose a new one when I got here."

Wick can understand that. They had also chosen a new name — for different reasons, probably.

Wick continues to stare at Chester, not sure what the next question should be. They've asked so many already. Chester seems nonplussed by the eye contact. He continues to suckle at the Lollipop.

Wick really doesn't know what else to say right now. This is frustratingly awkward. Usually Wick babbles when things are frustratingly awkward — it is the thing to do — but their mind is a blank.

This dude is important, he's important to the job, he knows who you are, he made a creepy census of everyone in town.

This is the job. He is in what accounts for your home. This is not a public venue right now, it is closed. He should not be here.

Find out what's going on.

Say something.

Go on, seriously, say something.

"This isn't happy hour, it's 3 in the morning or something."

Other than that.

Wick sighs with disappointment in himself, and plods over to the fridge to put the milk jug away, not taking their eyes off of the intruder, who continues to nonchalantly stand.

"What's a guy like you doing in a place like this?" Chester asks, as if he was the one interrogating him.

"Not a guy," Wick says, gently. Then: "I needed milk."

"Late night jitters? I'm sorry I frightened you." Chester says, coolly. He adjusts his jade-tinted eyeglasses. Wick still doesn't know what to think about this man. He moves over to Wick and passes behind the bar, placing the stem of his lollipop within the trash can. Wick eyes him as he steps back out behind the bar. If this is happy hour, he isn't drinking.

"Well, thank you. You could fix it by answering some more of my questions," Wick says, unsure if proceeding with the carrot or the stick method would be more effective.

Chester nods calmly. He is very elegant. "I don't know an Anthea," he says.

Wick does not believe this for a second. There is something wrong.

"You made a census though," Wick states.

"Uh, what?" Chester says. "No clue what you're talking about."

Wick doesn't believe this either. They look at Chester, sceptical. The edge of their eye contact doesn't seem to affect Chester at all. It's just looking.

"I like the quiet down here," he continues. "I show up when there's no one about, in the midnight hours. You can hear the silence. Well, you can hear the wind."

It's true. The gentle wind outside is barely audible, but it's there. Wick had never noticed.

They stand in the bar, listening to that outside wind. Neither of them have drinks, but Wick, still incredibly tired, begins to understand the concept of happy hour. There is a strength in this night. Wick has always felt

uncomfortable in Avenue's powerful solitude, its slowness. It is interesting to interpret it in a different way.

"Pardon my asking, but if you're not a man, what shall I call you?" Chester asks.

There's something more to the question than politeness and that broken-glass thing straight people do, Wick realises. Chester cares.

"You can start with Wick," they answer.

"Nice to meet you, Wick," he responds.

* * *

It's a while before Wick actually goes up to bed that night, and they do so out of sheer exhaustion. Wick wanted answers, and while Chester, once again, was a secretive guy, he sure was better to talk to than most people Wick has met. But there were no answers, and really, against Wick's better judgement, they had to return to bed for fear of falling unconscious on a bar stool. Chester kept bouncing from topic to topic, and was excellent at non-sequiturs — small-talk, you know? It wore Wick out.

They discussed everything, like scientific interpretation, *Dune Messiah*, favourite colours, politics, *The X-Files*, and coming out. Chester doesn't even remember coming out; he remembers it always being okay. He asks if that makes him privileged, and Wick doesn't know how to answer.

Wick isn't very good at small talk, he thinks. He *is* good at conversation if it involves interesting things, but so often, it simply doesn't. People love to talk about sports. Wick does not understand this. They understand the playing of sports, *that*'s fun, that has a point, but Wick doesn't get how people just sit back and watch other people do it.

Wick also can't get Chester out of their mind. They don't really have any answers about anything important — the mystery is still afoot or whatever, but regardless there is a big *something* happening. There had been developments, Wick decided, though he is not entirely certain what they were.

They decide to return the following night. After all, it *is* happy hour.

* * *

The hour approaches, and Wick is not *entirely* unsurprised to find Chester downstairs, waiting by the bar, without a drink, listening.

"Ah, so you're a fellow devotee now," Chester says. "It's rare someone else gets it."

"It's a sensory thing," Wick states. "I get those."

"I can imagine."

Chester looks a lot more sullen tonight, his skin a bit — well, it isn't fair to say *green* or *sickly;* he is still quite fine to look at, and he doesn't look *un*well, but he doesn't really look all that *well* either.

Wick doesn't ask. I mean, they thoroughly want to ask, but usually people don't like questions, and Chester is certainly not one to answer them. It has only just struck Wick that perhaps, Chester really isn't sure how.

It is another windy night. There are no raindrops, though Wick keeps feeling as if it is *about* to rain, there is something in the sky. A preamble.

The world is turning.

Wick thinks about the video they showed you in science class, where you started from a random dude sitting on a blanket in a park, and it zoomed out to show you the park, the city, New York, the State of New York, the United States, the world, the Solar System, the Galaxy, and how it just kept going outward. They wonder how far that went.

"I think trees are very important," Chester says, entirely unprompted.

Wick nods in agreement. "They take in CO_2 from the atmosphere."

"No, they *grow*," Chester says, and Wick saw the passion in his eyes about the subject. "They're little things, and it takes hundreds of years ,but they're like us, they want, they yearn, they reach for the stars. There's a texture to them." Chester smiles softly, as if trees themselves were his own private joke.

He looks so happy. "And even when you make something out of them, I think they still *breathe*."

Like the building we're sitting in, Wick thinks, but he does not say it out loud.

Chester gets up from his seat and walks to the door of the bar. Wick thinks he is leaving for a moment, and there's this weird pang thing in his chest. Heartburn? What have they eaten lately?

But Chester beckons, and Wick steps forward to the door. They look out into the parking lot, confused as to the point, until Chester gently directs Wick's attention to the direction left from the parking lot, to the tall and thin forest, just barely visible in the perfect gloom.

They look out into the deep and total blackness of the beautiful dark blue night. It is a blissful thing. Wick usually sees such misery in that dark. Feels so alone. But tonight, he isn't.

"Come back tomorrow?" Chester asks, smiling calmly.

Wick nods, unaware he has taken Chester's hand in his own.

* * *

Wick is having an emotional response that has not been anticipated. This is an exceedingly nice emotional response; however, it is also making them a nervous fucking wreck. What is this? What is going on?

Okay, so clearly this Chester Lockley guy is, like, a soulful dude, you know, interested in the environment and stuff? Why would he have anything to do with the creepy census thing of doom? It just doesn't track. There is the mission! There is a mystery to solve here! There are logistical questions to be answered!

And meanwhile, Wick is out here involved in literary discussions of *Dune* and *premarital hand-holding*. What the fuck. What is happening. What do we call this.

The panic has not dissuaded itself, and has rather increased as night approaches slowly through the uneventful day. As Wick *waits* for something

to happen to them. The world plods on carelessly. Of course, Wick never sees Chester during the day. What would be the point of that, having normal logic to existence?!? *Fuck*. Make things make sense!

Wick tries to make themself nicer as the late late late time approaches, combing their hair over and over, attempting to remove a frustrating stray hair from one side of their face, trying to decide whether or not makeup is too feminine, and cursing themself the whole time because this is an investigation, not a *hot date,* what are you *letting* this man do to *you*?!

The clock seems to even *tick* slowly as the time reveals itself. Light and shadow hang like vultures.

"What's been up with you, lately?" June asks, at one point.

Wick sits there. Doesn't know what to say. Time does not pass like in fairytale and legend, not now. Things are icy slow. There are no rabbits in the field.

The bar is so wrong in its normal hours now. There's something about the seclusion, the late night adventure of it — Wick used to like talking with Todd, or the Bachelorettes. Rita was good at conversations, when they could pry her away. But not now, for some reason.

Since when was he such a misanthrope? Wick has always certainly been aware of the queer doubt in their brain.

Certain people just can't get it, that no, he doesn't want to be called 'he,' or 'they,' they want to be called *both*. That they want to be masculine, but don't want to be a *man* because that holds a *connotation*. Something hard to say that definitely isn't them. People don't get that. But Chester does.

Somehow it's more difficult to live with the daily grind, the little microaggressions, now that they knew that at least one person did understand. Or at least listened.

But they aren't there. They *aren't,* they just disappear in the day, like a vampire who hisses at the sunlight. They aren't a vampire — Wick has checked with garlic, to Chester's bemusement — and Wick is unsure why that imagery keeps occurring to them. But that's not the point. Why isn't Chester

here *now?* Those thoughts take up the world until the time comes, and Wick descends down the creaky wood stairs, stepping slowly down to where they met, near the bar, in a still and motionless dance.

The bar is empty, and Wick feels truly, truly abandoned for one horrid moment, and not just because none of their questions will be answered. That thought doesn't even enter their mind.

They slam the door open onto the porch, the porch where they held hands, near the parking lot, that porch, and they look, *look*, but he's not here either. There's nothing.

Fucking bullshit. This — this isn't okay! Wick has seen loads of romcoms, and part of their brain wants to assume that this isn't Chester's fault, that something has gotten in the way or something — but also, Wick isn't really thinking rationally, and they aren't thinking about romcoms, they are thinking that Sam didn't fucking abandon Frodo halfway up Mount Doom. They are also thinking that *you're STUPID for investing yourself so much in this.*

But Wick sees something white and iridescent in the distance, near the trees, like the trail of a coat, and Wick isn't sure what it is and what he should do about it before he realises he is *running*.

* * *

The woods coo (probably owls) in the cold night air. The window is open in the forest. Chester is stepping in. The grass is cold and wet under his feet.

"Don't you care about how I feel, watching you like that?" the woman's voice begins. She is not there. But her voice is.

Into the trees. The branches are thin and long and the trees are thin and long and everything looks sharp and scratchy, even the mist. The mist at night is appallingly strong — things stop after a point, so what's here is what's in front of you, and only just.

"It's a long trip, but it'll be worth it down."

The way you walk into forests like this is a compulsion, it is a trance — you don't realise that you're doing something incredibly stupid, because why

would you think that? You're too proud of yourself, because you're going to do what other people haven't done, you're going to explore and solve every mystery ever written. Do you want a flashlight? You can't have it. It wouldn't turn on anyway.

"I am the thing in the mailbox. I am half-cooked. Do you want to know what I mean?"

The nonsense words drive Chester in. The siren's call. They're holy words, words that invite questions. Haunting, perhaps, hesitant, reticent words. Conflicting voices, they seem to disagree. But they call him, even if the words themselves don't. Each step deeper into the woods is more and more irresistible. She's calling, and you'll pick up the phone.

"When they stop, and rebuild, they will be beautiful."

And there is no hesitation. The human mind wants answers, wants to know if they're the one that's clever enough. Chester's feet plod on, toward the understanding, he thinks. Pressing into the sad song, the sirens howling. He is no ancient horror, no vampire, no ghoul; he is a man, ordinary and alone. Is he being followed? He tries not to panic. His steps continue.

"Run in, victim, to what you aren't."

Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house, we go.

* * *

A few months earlier, Wick had seen an old moustachioed man at the bar. He spoke little, and his voice was wrinkled and craggy, just like his face. He looked Wick in the eyes, and asked if Wick would like advice, like wisdom, which of course they did. The old man nodded sensibly, and had told Wick not to go into these very particular woods. He had smiled an uneasy smile, and grunted that "You might stop existing, or worse." The words had stuck with Wick, how could they not — advice from strangers was often very pertinent indeed, especially strangers you never see again.

"You knew, didn't you?"

Now, Wick is in the woods, and they are dark blue and faded green and grey and black and brown, and the trees are thin and tall, and there is hardly

any light that's managed to make its way down through the branches. There is this low drone that hums, like the uneasy ambience of a horror film. And every once in a while, there are clicks. Tick. Click. Chirp.

For a moment, Wick is happy, because these trees remind him of *The X-Files*, where they always have scary trees, but then Wick remembers that the trees *are scary.*

Careful not to step on the branches on the mossy ground, careful not to make noise, be careful, human. Tread softly. Feel the leaves slick past your forehead, and duck below the bramble and push through the briar.

So dark here — only so many ways to describe this darkness, aren't there?

Wick is certain this is not the friendly hopeful black that he had seen on the porch, holding hands; this is not the bright *potential* of the unknown, the optimism of not knowing, but the unknown's dark shade. There is nothing good here.

And Wick likes the trees. Trees are good, the trees aren't the problem, and Chester had said all the right things about them. Like a poet, there was nuance to his words. But these trees are no longer the pretty trees on the outside; these are wrong trees. Trees perhaps not wrong in themselves, but fearful, for the not knowing what may be around any corner. Aren't there wolves in the wood? They daren't howl, but there is a certainty that they are here. This is not the same forest that Chester had pointed at with such relish. Worse than any thought of wolves or mad creatures is the idea there were people in these woods. That thought hurts Wick's brain most of all.

"Butterflies to a candle. Addicts to a cigar."

The moody night makes no progress, giving no way to day, but Wick wonders if they would even see it here. Would it even help? Find him. You gotta find him. It's the right thing to do.

Wick is going through the trees, and the solemn silence, the maddening twist of the violin is clawing at them. The witchy place is cold and deep, but the worst thing about the entire experience is the normalcy of it. Wick has seen things before — most recently a horrific entity that really wanted to be

Debbie Reynolds — but there is nothing of the abruptly unreal to this forest, nothing strictly at a boundary, a threshold between what can and not be, but there's this deadly fucking normalcy to these woods. They're just trees.

"Oh, the War, the War sings. Over and not over. Things and anti-things. Yes, the War sings…"

Trees that Wick has spent the whole walk ascribing things to, that they want him to suffer or something. But they are just normal looking trees, the curling undergrowth. Wick does not fear these trees. They fear what the trees may hide.

The long brush of the grass tickles as they stride forward.

* * *

At a certain point in the woods, Wick's foot juts up against a rock, and he nearly trips. It is a strange rock. It is stone, and it is natural — you can tell that it's not carved, *you just know,* but it is shaped like a complete and perfect sphere, a natural circle. Wick knows this is an important rock. He places it in his pocket.

* * *

There is a clearing ahead. The brush is shaped like a raven, matte black and flat and textured, but that's just a trick of the light. Wick steps into the clearing — remnants of long ago pavement crumble now, beneath their feet. This was once a road. Once a modern road, even. But it is now a reclamation of the forest.

Oh my gosh, Chester is there!! He's standing over there, right in the open, he's fine!

"Chester!" Wick exclaims, rushing over.

Chester smiles at the sight of Wick. "You came," he grins softly.

Wick looks at him, a little perplexed. "Where are we?"

"We are here," Chester answers, not dreamily or strained in the least.

"Why did you come here?" Wick asks, cautiously.

"We need answers. We — we *need,*" Chester says, pleadingly. Wick can't help but agree. Of course there's a mystery to solve, but Wick doesn't *need* to know that — he needs to know that Chester is alright.

And so it is asked.

"Are you alright?"

It doesn't sound like it's enough when it's said out loud. Wick checks the deep red abrasion on Chester's face, though he isn't really referring to the cut. Cuts can be fixed. There's something else wrong; how tonight became about dark woods instead of happy hour.

"Better now," Chester answers brusquely.

"I am very scared right now. This is not a nice forest," Wick states, and despite the strong tremor in their words, they outwardly show a state of calm. "Please tell me everything."

"I saw a ghost," Chester says. Wick is struck by the lack of prelude. There's no… '*you might think this is crazy, but this is what I saw*' — Chester knows Wick will believe him. Which, as a matter of fact, they do.

And as they speak, Wick sees another ghost.

The apparition crawls from the trunk of a tree, like it is climbing out of a deep pit, but there is no pit whatsoever, it is a completely ordinary tree. Wick can even see the other side of it — it's crawling forward, but it's crawling out of *nothing*.

Luckily, before it gets close enough to touch, the movement begins to become jerky and erratic, held back, slow. Elastic. An impression of an arm stretching out, pushing forward and stretching this solid wood as if it was bubble gum. You can see the face and it's arm reaching out. Held back by the thin stretchy surface, textured with the same wood. Wick thinks it's like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, but it's so much worse when you can tell that it isn't some special effect on a film — there are so many imperfections and horrific creases in the phantom. It doesn't want to be here, not like this. It's being *forced*. But it crawls forward. And suddenly, without a sound, not even a wail,

it slides back into the tree, the metaphorical rubber band broken, and it vanishes.

Wick starts babbling at once. "Did you see that? Seriously, Chester, did you see that thing, it was horrific, you could — you I — the —"

And Wick thinks back to the ghost in their yard, when he was _____. It strikes him how utterly different it is. He doesn't believe in these things, not in strict dichotomy, but the thought occurs all the same: instead of a ghost from Heaven, he has just seen a glimpse of Hell.

* * *

The two continue to walk deeper into the forest. They need to know. There is absolutely no choice in the matter. There must be answers. There must be a solution.

Wick holds tightly onto Chester's arm, and eventually, his shoulder and torso as well. Chester holds back. The apparitions continue to appear as they stray further from the path, going deeper into the heart of the woods.

"I just wanted to pick some flowers for you," Chester says, carefully. "I was just going to be a moment. Then I saw it. I had to follow it in. I know that isn't an excuse. But I had to. I'm sorry."

Wick can't really pay attention to the lovely gesture, because they're in a haunted demon forest or something. They continue to hold on to Chester, feeling like a child imagining a monster under the bed. Wick has always thought until now that the fear of the unknown is the most frightening thing of all, and yes, they still mostly prescribe to that. But that was before Wick had seen the face's attempt to clamber out of the tree, and it *is* actually worse to see than what Wick can imagine in his brain. And Wick is no slouch in the imaginative area. That — that *thing* was beyond imagination. Contorted, agonised, *inhuman*.

For a moment, Wick thinks they're the only one that's so rattled, but then he looks into Chester's fearful eyes. Their strange *vampire chic* that had made him look, so, well, for lack of a better word, sexy, is all ruined in the mud and

dirt; their hair is tousled, and there is deep panic in Chester's hazel eyes. For all the bravado, he isn't doing well either.

And it shouldn't, but that makes Wick feel a little better somewhat, because yes, the ghost stuff *is* shit, but he seriously, seriously, isn't alone. That comforts them. And so Wick doesn't ask any questions, not right now, does not say a word as they push forward for the answers.

And Chester would have struggled to say anything too if he had spoken; he would have struggled to say that he's used to the night shift because he worked as a performer at the local troupe which really only did night performances and that he is sorry he didn't show up all the time and that this is the first time he's really ever been close to anyone and everyone just pushes him away and so he puts on all this flamboyant bad boy stuff and deep down he's just such a wreck he can't get over anything.

He doesn't say that. He doesn't need to. They just walk, and they live in the fear of what lies ahead, and they live in hope of what does too.

This is a place of longing, of needing; not just for answers, but for however many things you can't have — or at least, can't have right now.

* * *

They reach the grove. It is another clearing. The actual heart of the forest; some pumping, *beating* part of the heart, at any rate, perhaps a pulmonary artery or an aorta or something. Unlike the hutch they were in before, this is a vast cavern of vines and growth.

The grove — or whatever it may be called — drips with moss and peat. The air is thick and languid, and you can begin to see where the growth has overtaken some remnants of buildings. A former neighbourhood rests in this forest, forgotten to time. The industrialised, brand new wood is at the mercy of these ancient oaks, which must be hundreds of years old, yet grow over and around these fettered houses, which, despite their disrepair, couldn't be that old, really. Or is it that the ancient trees are industrial, metal, belching things? Wick is uncertain.

At the centre of the grove, in a sort of depressive town square, rests a heap of unsorted garbage. Among other things, the rubble contains old boots, cans and tins, a bedframe, an easel, an anvil, cardboard boxes, old leather, an electrical fan and a safe. At the top of the pile, almost impishly, sits a Japanese woman with large pince-nez eyeglasses, middle-aged, wearing a thick and ragged cardigan that looks as though it might have been fished out of the pile — presumably, her hoard.

At the foot of the pile, there is a mailbox with bloodshot and decidedly human eyes.

"INVERSION!" The woman at the top of the hoard yells without recourse, a complaint to the heavens. *"INVERSION!"* she bellows, even louder and deeper than before, with the strength of an opera singer. **"INVERSION!"**

The woman leaps off her hoard, in a way unbefitting of anything Wick has ever seen before. She does not leap normally; she seems to move in pieces from one position to another. She grins, clearly her best approximation of a *normal* smile, like the ones that humans do.

"What are these ones, what are these ones," she mutters maniacally. This is someone who's been in the woods far too long. *"You are not trapped, you do not stretch through, you two are no thing of the thing. Shameful!"*

"Hello, I'm — I'm Wick, and this is Chester… We're concerned about the ghosts," Wick attempts, though the words seem fallible from the moment they leave Wick's mouth.

"Ah, yes yes yes yes yes yes, you are the ones called through, you are to be made, yes, this makes sense to Madam," the woman patters. She does not pause for breath. Possibly she doesn't *ever*. Her crazed eyes flare; they are as bloodshot as the ones upon her mailbox. *"Apologies, apologies, big condolences, it is such a shame you are not them, I have been working so hard on them and it is a big shame. They've all taken off. Good for them, I say. Stretching through. Stretching through. Beautiful, beautiful work."*

The woman, hyperactive and perhaps *too* fast, moves over to a machine, which she suddenly adjusts with a wrench in a matter of seconds, before

suddenly being back where she stood before, like some kind of eclectic yo-yo. She does this several times throughout the conversation. There is nothing human in the way she speeds around her piles of tinkering, gears, wire; her machines are haphazard and everywhere about her pile. She almost seems to exist in more than one place at once.

"Have you seen them stretch through? Everyone should be like that," she says, fierce and dour. *"And they will; I've done lots of work, and then when I'm done everyone will pop out and I will get my credit,"* she adds proudly. *"Yes, yes yes yes yes yes yes,"* she jitters.

Wick begins to think that if they do not say something now in response, the woman will launch into another madcap essay. But before he says another word, a vapour-like hand claws out of one of the nearby abandoned building's planks, and snaps toward Chester's arm. "Chester!" he exclaims, ineffectual.

The thing has grabbed onto Chester, and is dragging him back into the wood. Wick reaches out and pulls back on Chester's other arm, a strange game of tug of war, trying to rescue him from the apparition.

But the woman *strikes* Wick in the chest with her wrench, and they are sent flailing to the ground. Chester, despite all his strength, is dragged, screaming into the wood, which he vanishes into, leaving no trace. Wick tries to call out to him, but their chest hurts, and they hope for a brief second that nothing is broken. But what they truly hope is that Chester is alright.

"You're trying to stop me!" the woman shrieks. *"Stop me from protecting them, containing them, making them right! Irredeemable!"*

The woman stalks forward. Wick thinks for a moment that her eyes are red, but such a thing would be fantastical. Her eyes are the same hazel-black that they were before, flaring behind her pince-nez.

"I hate you now," the woman says, her deranged eyes flaring and her hair trailing behind her like a twisted veil.

She is so full of malice and rage and bloodlust, she moves like an animal ready to strike, raising her wrench once more. Something that Wick has done has enraged her beyond words; every mannerism she had contributed to the

task of appearing mildly person-like has dropped away, in service of pure hostility. The woman is beating at her skin, and shrieking, and the skin clangs like metal. The mailbox by her side *pulses* in unison.

"Please don't hurt me," Wick pleads, unsure how else to respond, trying to move away from the mad woman.

They can hardly believe that, at first, Wick had found her almost amusing — there's nothing but vengeance in how she moves towards him now. She no longer rambles at him; she's too furious to. She'll talk to herself when she's done. When this intruder is a *paste*. The now almost absurdist woman is terrifyingly silent, not jerking from place to place, slowly striding forward, just yearning to strike. She is focused on trying to kill him.

The apparitions are all around the machines, all around the clearing in the square, in the rubble, twisting out of every location they can find, stretching into the world over and over, none of them quite making their way through the gossamer fabric of reality. That's precisely what they look like too, like the twisted impression of someone in a cloth sheet, except the sheet is the ground, or the metal, or the wood, or, really, anything nearby. And somehow, you can still see how mutilated they are behind the sheets of the world. Twisted and scarred, each of them a gothic monstrosity.

The woman approaches steadily. Her eyes bulge, and her lips are twisted into a ferocious snarl. Each of her steps alone are overwhelming to Wick's ears — there is nothing more anxiety-inducing than knowing that someone is in pursuit of you. That they are only a few feet away, and they are getting closer.

Each step is a tremendous bang of a drum, a resounding and horrific burst, an echo.

Wick trembles.

Wick doesn't have an out-of-body experience often. It's not a thing they did, and it isn't something they do now. But they feel like they're almost watching themself do it, rather than thinking of it at all, as they reach into the pocket of their nice red jacket and snatch the stone from before. They watch themself as they throw it straight past the woman and into the machine she

has developed; the machine she loves so much for a reason Wick can't possibly understand. The stone, heavy, somehow bashes straight through. The woman *wails*.

Wick stares as the machine begins to smoke and cinder, before bursting into flames. The woman doesn't know what to say about it either, in, for once, wordless disbelief.

The tormented souls, whining and screaming around them, begin to *untwist*. And then they *shine*. They begin to glow, and glisten, and they *are* beautiful, no longer held in place by twisting wood or the invisible elastic. No longer tied to the ground; to the earth. They're blue and light and like heavenly mist. They float around them like wisps, they flow and spill all around Wick, until the dark centre of the forest is *illuminated* with so much light it hurts to look. But Wick still does, watching these people, people of all kinds, see *freedom*. The woman had wanted to make them real, to make them like her, tether them, contain them. But they *are* real. Just look. Their faces, distorted sure, but no longer contorted, shine with glowing thankfulness. Hundreds of people, of every age, shape, colour, all glowing. And there they float, like the wind.

The evil woman — and the mailbox, for they are a duo-thing, a togetherness — they simply wail in fury and disappointment, personally offended by the ghost's *being*. The woman lies on the ground, motionless, beside the mailbox's wooden stand. She says nothing. Catatonic.

The forest blurs in this angelic mist, the sparkles of fireworks and love, the ghosts rising higher and higher, and it continues to glow brighter and brighter and Wick actually can't look now, no matter how much they want to, and eventually it's so bright that closing their eyes doesn't even work because the light creeps through their eyelids, until the clearing is complete, stark light.

Then, when Wick comes to, there is nothing but the forest. The ghosts are gone, and so is the junk, and the destroyed houses that had been unnaturally growing around the wood, the things that the Woman was trying to make with her strange machine. The only remnant of the clearing having had any influence at all is the mailbox, which no longer has eyes.

Wick picks up the stone ball, which is unblemished. It is still important. Wick places it within their pocket. And standing in the middle of the forest clearing, now so normal and feeling so friendly, nothing more than the woods in what is surely now the morning, Wick can only think about one thing.

Chester. *My god, what happened to Chester?*

* * *

Anthea sits in her office, and she smokes. The office doesn't feel right to her without something husky in the air. Outside the office door, the bar continues to turn, as is its wont. *My Sharona*'s playing over the speaker in the bar, muffled by the wooden walls. She nods to the strong beat of it.

She breathes heavily.

She's been reorganising the cabinet — it was *already* organised, why don't people *ask* before doing things? So frustrating. And why don't people *dust* this place? The dust is all over her nice cocktail dress, and she only has twenty of these dresses, a goddamn rarity as far as she's concerned. These people. What does she pay them for?

Does she pay them?

Oh, she can't recall right now. She pays in experience, that's for certain, and that's what you need to survive in Avenue. That's what she needed to learn, back in the day, and she had *the best* tutors.

The cabinet is a little special something she borrowed before she came to Avenue, from some Archon hillbilly, random organisation, or ancient something or other. Again, she's not sure, and it doesn't really matter, at the end of the day. These things come and go, and one of the great benefits of life is to be ephemeral.

The cabinet is a cabinet; names aren't important. What's important is what's on the papers now. She hopes they haven't been placed too out of order.

Eventually, she comes to a particular survey that was once possible to have one day. A useful possibility. But now it reads:

H 2 - PRESUMPTUOUS - COLUMN- 9

[redacted]

And the rest of the page is blank. Ah, but history — and possibility — are indeed fallible. And what's written is probably true.

She crumples the paper and throws it in the wastepaper basket.

* * *

A Day Passes.

Wick is in their bedroom tonight. It's happy hour — the *real* happy hour, where you can hear the world. Hear the wind around you. But there's no wind to listen to tonight, no rain. The world is frustratingly calm, which only succeeds in making it feel more empty. They don't dare go downstairs, even if the bar is empty and peaceful right now.

Especially because it's empty and peaceful right now.

They lie, wrapped in their cocoon of blankets and sheets, overhearing, but too frightened to remove the blankets and lose the weight upon their shoulders.

They aren't crying; it's a bit worse. They want to cry but the tears aren't coming out.

No rain, no storm, no mist, no wind. A clear night has never felt so unsatisfactory before.

What is it with happy endings? Why do they come for *normal people*? Why not him? Wick sighs, and reminds themself that he isn't *abnormal,* that being queer is a perfectly normal thing to be. That it's alright.

They sigh.

Doesn't feel very true somehow. Wick still feels *different*, regardless. Does everyone feel like that?

How *do* people feel?

There's a lot of this sort of thing. It goes on for a really long time, the self flagellation and thinking about what was and how they could have done better, and how it's all their fault really.

The thoughts just continue to go. This sort of misery has a way of lasting, especially when you aren't sure what happened. Wick is pleased he doesn't have to write any of this in a report, as it wasn't official. They wouldn't know where to start. Wouldn't know how to explain what happened to Chester. It was — it was so fast.

That's the thing. Wick had hardly realised it was even happening before it had.

Things just feel dour.

And then there is a light, out the window. And Wick immediately rises to their feet, and, half-covered by blankets, *runs,* no hesitation. Some of them fall to the floor, but there's enough to remain modest enough, as Wick runs out of the room, down the stairs — barefoot, so the splinter-y wood *does* hurt — and outside, into the cool wet grass.

It's him.

Standing in their spot, Chester is there. Floating. Like those beautiful ghosts. Like *his ghost.* On the lawn so long ago… almost *exactly* like him, really…

Wick doesn't approach now, because they're scared of what it will be like if they reach out to try and touch Chester and just reach straight through him. But they stand near, as near as they can make themself go.

"You're really cool," Wick says, which means, *I love you, man.* Which somehow he can't say. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

Chester nods, understanding. He looks at Wick, and his translucent eyes are full. "It's difficult to show up in the right places," he says. "I think I may have been a bit early before."

"You were right on time," Wick says.

"I don't know how long I can stay," Chester says. "I'm untethered. It's — it's incredible. Like nothing I could ever dream."

Wick doesn't know what to say, still, and that's stupid because this is the time he *needs* to speak. He cannot let this moment pass.

"Please don't go anywhere," he manages out. "I don't want you to go anywhere."

Chester looks forlorn. "I don't want to go anywhere either."

Wick holds the blankets to his chest, as tightly as he can manage. He wants to feel held. He wants to feel safe. This is goodbye, Wick thinks, looking into Chester's eyes. People don't usually get this chance. And here they are, ruining it.

Something comes to Wick's mind, or perhaps they hear something, however briefly.

But at my back I always hear

Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near:

And yonder all before us lye

Deserts of vast Eternity.

Wick can't get the word goodbye out. Here he is — he's known someone for four or five days, or *however long it even is*. That's too fast for even a Disney Princess, and yet, and yet — this conversation quietly hurts his soul more than any evil witch in the woods could ever hope.

Chester feels so unsure. "This won't be 'goodbye'," he declares, "It can be an 'until we meet again'."

Wick smiles. "I'd like that," he says, quietly. As if this will make it so. But who knows these things, really?

It's so hard for them to talk now. It wasn't before.

Chester kneels down from his floating perch, slowly, tentatively, and places a textureless and invisible kiss upon Wick's forehead. And slowly he begins to dissolve into the air, like sparkling sand, blowing, softly, into the distance.

Standing there, on the lawn, Wick watches Chester go. And whether this is the first or the last time, standing there, he feels the wind blow.

He closes his eyes, gradually, and lowers himself to the blankets and to the grass. And, regardless of whether it's truly there or not, he listens for that same wind, wherever it may be.